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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AND LEGAL AFFAIRS

Testimony of Shenna Bellows, Secretary of State
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Testifying In Opposition to

L.D. 1055, "An Act to Prohibit the Use of Ballot Drop Boxes"

Senator Hickman, Representative Supica and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs, my name is Shenna Bellows and I am the Secretary of State and the chief elections officer. I am speaking today in opposition to L.D. 1055.

Ensuring that elections are both secure and convenient are among our top priorities in conducting elections. We should be very proud that we consistently rank among the best states in the nation in voter participation.

Due to numerous intertwining factors – including the pandemic and the subsequent need for innovation in minimizing contact between voters and election officials – a record number of Maine voters utilized absentee voting in 2020. About 62 percent of Maine voters in the November 2020 election voted by absentee, with an untold number of them utilizing drop boxes in their municipality. Some may have done so out of concern that the U.S. Postal Service was causing and experiencing unprecedented delays in delivering the mail. Some may have done so to save the money they would have spent on postage for other necessities. Some may have done so to avoid entering enclosed spaces in their town hall or polling location. No matter the reason, what we found in 2020 is that absentee ballot drop boxes were a welcome and necessary addition to our election infrastructure. Absentee ballot drop boxes were a factor in our success in 2020, a year we ranked third in the nation for voter participation. We are proud to be able to use absentee ballot drop boxes in every election since.

We do not know exactly how many people utilized drop boxes or returned the ballot directly to the clerk. Our current central voter registration system treats ballots returned to drop boxes or handed directly to the municipal clerk the same: "Delivered by voter." We know that in the November 2020 election, 230,564 voters cast their ballot this way, which was almost 28 percent of votes cast. In the November 2022 election, 101,323 ballots were "delivered by voter," or about 15 percent of vote cast. We anticipate that the new CVR will allow us to break out ballots dropped off to secure absentee drop boxes from other methods. That being said, we know anecdotally from clerks and voters alike that drop

boxes are invaluable – particularly for individuals commuting long distances to and from work and/or who have significant caregiver responsibilities.

Due to that popularity, by the November 2022 election, 364 out of our over 500 municipalities utilized a drop box – two of these used a second drop box as well. Because voting in Maine is conducted at the municipal level, ballot drop boxes are located outside municipal offices with appropriate security measures in place that meet safety and labeling standards. Placement close to a municipal office ensures the drop box will be monitored appropriately, accessible to all voters, and where ballots can be retrieved routinely by clerks or their staff. However, requests to place drop boxes in a secondary or tertiary location would require a municipality to have the additional locations approved by my department.

When absentee ballots are processed, regardless of return method, the information on the absentee ballot envelope is compared to the information on our voter rolls and matched to individual absentee ballot requests before being opened and the ballots themselves are removed. (Any ballot returned to a drop box without using the official absentee ballot return envelope would not be counted.) Additionally, absentee envelope inspection by one or more political parties or other interested individuals or organizations may, and often does, occur before processing begins. We have layers of checks and balances built into our election system before, during, and after voting – including a signature requirement on the absentee ballot envelope – to ensure that Maine voters can vote – once – and have that vote counted accurately. While some have raised the specter of 2 a.m. ballot dumps, that simply does not happen in Maine. If something like this were attempted, the ballots would not correspond to a request from a voter or immediate family member of a voter; therefore, they would not be in an official return envelope bearing the signature of the voter and they would not contain state-printed ballots, so any such ballots would not be counted.

For the above reasons, we oppose L.D. 1055. Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions that the committee may have.